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Contact: Terri Williams, REHS
Program Manager
Community
Environmental Health
(909) 387-4692

Protection Against Recreational Water Illnesses

As the weather warms up and people head outdoors, officials at San Bernardino County Environmental Health Services (EHS) are urging all county residents to monitor the chlorine and pH levels in their backyard swimming pools. Chlorine and pH, the disinfection team, are the first defense against germs that can make swimmers sick.

Chlorine kills germs in pools but it takes time to work. Therefore, it is important to make sure chlorine levels are between 1.0 and 3.0 ppm, the levels recommended by EHS. "Chlorine and pH should be tested daily," said Terri Williams, Program Manager for Community Environmental Health. "All sorts of things can reduce chlorine levels in pool water." Some examples are sunlight, dirt, debris and fecal matter from swimmers' bodies. However, the other member of the disinfection team, pH, which is the measurement of the relative acidity or alkalinity of the water, also affects the time it takes for chlorine to work.

Why is pH important? First, the germ-killing power of chlorine varies with pH level. As pH goes up, the ability of chlorine to kill germs goes down. Second, a swimmer's body has a pH between 7.2 and 7.8, so if the pool water isn't kept in this range then swimmers will start to feel irritation of their eyes and skin. Keeping the pH in this range will balance chlorine's germ-killing power while minimizing skin and eye irritation.

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The best way to kill germs is by routinely measuring adjusting both chlorine and pH levels. Since a few germs can survive for long periods in even the best-maintained pools, it is also important that swimmers don't swim when ill with diarrhea, don't swallow pool water, take frequent bathroom breaks and practice good hygiene.

A well-maintained pool, which includes properly using the pump and filter, prevents mosquitoes from breeding as well as keeps the water clear so swimmers can be seen while swimming at the pool bottom. Combining healthy swimming behaviors with good chlorine and pH control will reduce the spread of recreational water illnesses.

Citizens of San Bernardino County can call Environmental Health Services at (909) 884-4056 if they have questions or visit the web site www.sbcounty.gov/dehs

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